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THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 87

THE CLAIM OF OUR
MOTHER TONGUE

By the Rev. the Hon.
EDWARD LYTTELTON, D.D.

211

March, 1934



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THE CLAIM OF OUR MOTHER TONGUE

HOW can a thing which we men have created and day by day use for our own purposes have a claim on us? May we not do what we like with our own?

Probably this sort of question to any member of the English Association will seem rather childish. The answer, anyhow, is simple. We have a duty towards our language as we have towards anything that is beautiful; that is, to preserve it; to prevent it from being spoilt. So far we should all agree; and further that we have here the chief reason for the existence of our Association: namely, to remind our countrymen of the glory of our heritage; to bring before them the wonders of our national literature, and by means of careful criticism to separate the tinsel from the gold. Admirably has this task been undertaken by many whose contributions are kept safe in the archives of the Association or have been promulgated to a wider world.

My purpose to-day is a humbler and more restricted one. It is to point out some instances not only of mistakes in modern English which every educated man knows or can recognize as mistakes of grammar, prosody, or uglinesses of diction, but of random falsification of the meaning of words which has the disastrous effect of impoverishing the language. This I will explain directly; but there is a further purpose in view: namely, to suggest a specific line of action to which the Association is called: that is, briefly, to take measures for the checking of a process that is always going on, in the hope that a group of men with the authority to speak may utter warnings which shall not be in vain, though they be addressed to a remarkably heedless multitude. For is it not a formidable fact that the future of the great English language depends on the use of words by millions of people quite as unwilling as any other race of mankind to think before they speak?

The first subject then before us is mischief going on: what is it, and how does it work?

The Mischief

Some fifty years ago we were all taught by the scholar-poet, Archbishop Trench, that words have a history. Like living men and women they come into being, but nobody quite knows how or why or even when. As Bishop Westcott remarked, there is a veil over all beginnings. An apparent exception is when an individual

by some noteworthy conduct adds his name to the number of pre-existing words as a way of describing similar conduct or situations for all time. How little did the much-vexed Irishman, Captain Boycott, dream that by his constancy he was going to enrich our language by a new word: that word is simply his name, and the use of it is vigorously spreading. The immortalizing of that name required no sumptuous monument, no 'star-pointing pyramid' or laboriously compiled biography. Will the name of William Shakespeare last longer than this Captain's? and let us notice that by his bravery he affected human language for good; while the conceited German Emperor Sigismund (as Mahaffy remarked) tried vainly to injure it by violating a rule of grammar.

But we have to consider the grim fact that the history of single words is far oftener a story of degradation than of upraising. The most conspicuous example of the latter is *humility*, borrowed from a Latin word of disparagement but raised to express almost the greatest and most attractive of the Christian virtues. Both in Latin and Greek the word that was used to denote mean-mindedness suddenly came to mean the freedom from the tyranny of the Ego; not a negative but a positive virtue. The time came when a new word was required to express a new thing, a kind of goodness which may possibly have existed in Athens or Rome, unrecognized. When it was, no one could invent a new word, and in each centre a word for centuries condemned to base uses was clothed with a new dignity and elevated to great and lasting honour. Thereby hangs a tale; but we must pass on to reflect on the tragic story of the word *awful*. It is a sharply contrasted instance of a symbol of a great mystery rapidly sinking down to an expression of uttermost triviality and almost nothingness.

Awful originally meant that which inspires the spectator or hearer with the solemn feeling of awe. In a superb passage in his immortal sermon on 'Nature', J. B. Mozley dwells on the wonder of the feeling of awe being a pleasurable sensation; and how that the desire for it spurs idle and vacuous-minded men to travel thousands of miles in order to stimulate this feeling which somehow has grown torpid, 'pursy and slow', in the twentieth century. The instinct of awe is with us still, but it is ignored, and millions of English people have never heard the word since the Industrial Revolution has worked its effect. To-day, if you were to use the word on a platform the audience would automatically spell it o-r-e! and yet every newspaper that we read shows us that the metal is understood no more than the sensation.

Notice again that when the word was degraded it became a lie.

No one of us can live a week in London without hearing some demonstrative young person say, 'How awfully kind of you.' But no human kindness stirs the feeling of awe, though the Divine Kindness does. The random talker has told a lie and will do so again several times a day. But did we not learn from the late Monsieur Coué that the constant repetition of an assertion produces a physical effect? If so, this repetition certainly will produce a mental effect, presumably a baneful one.

Well, you will say, that may be true, but it is too late to do anything now. I grant it; but the tragedy may teach us a salutary lesson. When a great word is degraded, man has exercised his mysterious power, which is almost creative, and at the same time destructive. One generation of chatterboxes has added a silly word to our vocabulary and destroyed a noble and indispensable one. But it so happens that another word has been given us which covers, or used to cover, some of the same ground: that is *tremendous*. It was meant to express that which makes us tremble. But as we have lost the power of trembling just as we have lost the sensation of awe, the same fell instinct which handed the first word over to the tattlers of English-speaking people is now operating on the second. *Tremendous* has come to mean almost nothing, but is intended to give a vague impression of emphasis and is used by writers and speakers in the sanguine hope of stirring the emotions of their fellow citizens about something which cannot be stated with clearness and precision. I once heard an impassioned lady pleading for some charity on a platform. She spoke for ten minutes and used the word *tremendous* twenty-one times, and each time wrongly. At the end we apprehended an attack of ear-ache, and in self-defence we drove out of our minds, not only the hammer-strokes of a misused word, but all that she had been saying, whether intelligibly or not; and now of what she had been pleading for I have no idea whatever.

But a far more arresting instance is the following. It was no ebullient orator striving to stir the apathy of a Chelsea audience at three p.m. in summer time, but an accomplished penman writing in a magazine often acknowledged to be the best written of all our magazines—*The Round Table*—who perpetrated the following enormity. 'This would be a tremendous guarantee of peace.' Think what the world would be if that statement were approximately true! A guarantee of peace which would make us all tremble! We Englishmen, I take it, know very little about trembling. We went into the Great War without trembling; but half-way through somebody must have trembled, or the League of

Nations would not have been formed to establish peace on earth to save us all from ever thinking of trembling again. Yet in this fine magazine we read of a 'tremendous guarantee of peace'. Great Homer never nodded so conspicuously or so disastrously as this. Let us see what has happened.

There is a group of words, of which *tremendous* is one, which depend for their effect on being used rarely. If they are used again and again they come to suggest a state of things the very opposite of what is true. Take, for instance, this singular fact. A newspaper—I am told very widely read—advertises at the tail end of our otherwise harmless omnibuses that something *amazing* has occurred, in London or not far away, at Brixton or Pangbourne or Southend; that is to say, if a citizen spends a penny wisely and reads about the event, the reward is promised that he will be amazed. To be amazed is to be stupefied. But why should I spend a penny to be made stupider—if possible—than before? Of course what has really happened is not amazing at all, but when the news for the evening issue is dull the editor has to pretend that one item—it doesn't in the least matter which—is such as will dull the senses with a shock like a stunning blow.

Look too at that word *stunning*. I can't pretend to say what has brought it about that the effect on you if you are run down by a motor should be denoted by a word which by schoolboys mainly is used to mean 'delightful'. Again we notice that a misuse of an important word is to tell an untruth. Now I am not concerned to insist on the ethical effect of all this lying, but merely to point out that the community is busily engaged in ousting one important word after another simply by heedless and reiterated misuse.

There is one more great word in jeopardy, and I suppose no one of us is quite free from the guilt of misusing it: the word 'wonderful'. Not long ago a man of remarkable force of character and of intellectual power above the average of so-called educated men, died; and in an obituary notice in *The Times* deliberately written by a great scholar he was described as 'a very wonderful man'. Consider what this means. The appearance among us of such a man as this is far from being such as to provoke a great amount of wonder: for it is in reality not wonderful at all. Ever since mankind has been on this earth every generation has produced several men whose force of character made them worth noticing; that is, remarkable but not wonderful. The wonder would be if the whole of any one generation were of a dead level of character. The addition of the word 'very' intensifies the falsehood. What is meant is 'unusual', and even that would often be too strong. If an octogenarian walks

three miles a day he is called wonderful by kind people who wish to be civil to him, possibly for interested motives. The effect of this slushy talk is no laughing matter. The faculty of wonder is certainly dulled in a society where the word is constantly misapplied. But what is to become of us as a nation if we cease to wonder? Already, it has often been remarked, the multiplication of new inventions has stifled our faculty of being surprised; just as in the War the emotion of horror was dulled by familiarity with ghastly happenings. So I maintain the nauseating use of the expression 'wonderful' deprives us of a great word which when vulgarized becomes unavailable for the use for which it was born. If we have no word wherewith to rouse each other's sense of wonder—the parent of philosophy and an integral part of the religious sense—the emotion itself is weakened and starved, and the loss to our equipment for the quest of the Higher Life must be incalculable.

Buoyed up, therefore, by the hope of some authority some day stepping in to arrest the spoiling of our heritage, let me briefly indicate a few questions the answers to which seem very uncertain. Their importance is slight compared with those already mentioned. They are not of paramount urgency but of some interest. When we take a word from the Greek like *ethics*, and others ending in *ics*, are they singular or plural? Does the curious fact that in Greek neuter plurals used to take the singular person of the verb affect our usage now? No doubt only a minority of us talk about ethics, but a very large number play golf. Well then, are we to say the links *are* poor or *is* poor? Authorities are divided, and there is no unanimity even in moments of deep emotion.

Old men can remember the cold reception given to *reliable* when it came into England, I believe, from over the water. It was said that the word violated grammar, for we say *rely on* not *rely* alone; but the same argument applies to the unassailable word *available*. I suggest that the objection to *reliable* is that it is an exact synonym for the fine old word *trustworthy*, which in obedience to some sinister influence seems to be yielding ground to the American. Is not this a pity? As to synonyms, is it too late to stamp upon *commence* instead of *begin*? French words, let it be noticed, often denote a latent desire to be what is called genteel. So a damsel in a High School not long ago, narrating the Parable of the Talents, wrote of the bad servant that he hid his talent in a *serviette*! A foreign word which has been objected to but which seems to express something in its own right is *standpoint*. It may be too late to debar it from our vocabulary, and if so let us use it

without demur. It would be a relief to have the question decided for us.

Some usages of language raise interesting questions of ethics and custom. About fifteen years ago a writer in *The Times* used the relative pronoun *who* in reference to a horse. Ought *who* to be restricted to persons, and is a horse a person? Historians, anyhow, should note the fact; for I doubt if a hundred and twenty years ago, when a speaker in Parliament was hooted at for talking of the 'rights of animals', such an expression would have been possible.

Andrew Lang was caustic in his comments on the very common pleonasm, *This instance is a good one*, instead of *is good*. On the other hand two of the very highest authorities, J. H. Newman and Archbishop Trench, have both committed themselves to *under these circumstances*. The supreme translator in Latin and Greek, R. C. Jebb, used to lament the intrusion of the word *calculated* instead of *likely* into otherwise good writing; especially when it was preceded, as it often is, by the ugly adverb *eminently*. A speaker who says *eminently calculated* when he means *very likely* is wasting breath, for the want of which he will die some day. Jebb also, when he took to politics, was amused at the daring but irrevocably adopted use of the participle *arising* in one connexion. Any day in a formal committee meeting one may hear the phrase 'arising out of the Minutes, Mr. Chairman, may we not consider, &c.' Strictly speaking, that means that either the speaker or the chairman, or both, are arising out of Minutes. To what altitude may we hope they will attain? One need not be a writer of the eminence of Newman or Jebb to be pained at some expressions we are nowadays condemned to read or hear. I never shall forget the horror betrayed by the late highly accomplished member of our Association, Mr. John Bailey, when he was told of the linguistic effort of a young Oxonian from Overseas. He was an aspirant to literary fame, and on being told by his tutor that his style lacked colour he took the hint gallantly and began his next essay with the words 'Shakespeare had oceans of vim'. Bailey, though easily amused, was by this only disgusted, and we wished we had not told him.

It is worth considering if there is not a principle on which we may regulate the introduction of French words such as *bizarre* (which I believe comes from the very interesting Basque people) and *debonair*. Do these words express something which no English word does? I should say they do, but am not sure. A word which to some of us is a mere nuisance is *intriguing*, and it will remain a nuisance till its meaning is more securely fixed than it is now.

Again, there is a very curious process going on which shows itself in a random use of prepositions. Scholars of the New Testament Greek have long discovered that as classical Greek sank into what is called Hellenistic Greek several prepositions came to be used so widely that they might mean almost anything. Now is it a sign of decay that something similar is in these days going on with us? Not long ago some interesting instances were given in *The Times*. The harmless little word 'up' has come in for hard treatment, and for years has been added to the imperative mood of sundry verbs to give emphasis to the injunction, though its proper meaning vanishes altogether. Why should 'play up' heard on the football field have a more bracing effect on the energies than simply *play*, or perhaps *play down*. At first the novelty attracts attention, but to what? Why, to the words used and not to the thing commanded. We remember the instance of a great English athlete and pastor of boyhood, Vassall of Repton, who, when in the middle of reading house prayers to his youthful and irresponsive flock, suddenly turned and testily cried, 'Here, pray up, you fellows!' No doubt there was a momentary effect, but was it the effect desired? I doubt it. Think too of the mystery of the expression, colloquial if not slang, *hard up*. Why *up*? Why not *down*? Who first put the two words together to mean something which separately they could not mean?

One more conundrum, the answer to which seems very recondite. What can have been the origin of the very curious but conventional expression which I dare say is used a hundred thousand times every week-day, 'Has the postman been?' What would the imaginary visitor to our earth from Mars, who had learnt English, suppose to be taking place, the first time he heard the question asked? He would soon have learnt that Englishmen have little or no taste for metaphysics; yet he could not have failed to hear, emanating from the mouths of people who never for a moment have doubted the local postman's existence, a question implying that all previous experience of that patient functionary may have been an hallucination, and the functionary himself no better than a phantom. Yet the moment the postman behaves as a phantom by coming ten minutes late angry murmurs are heard and pater-familias meditates a letter to *The Times*. All this is hard to explain. We notice that the same liberty is taken with the verb *to be*, when some one says, 'I have been to Brighton'; but the licence is not so daring, owing to the similarity between the wrong phrase and the correct one, 'I have been at Brighton.' The wrong use is confined to the past participle.

An acute friend tells me he has seen the phrase 'a hollow victory' used twice in the same number of *The Times*, meaning in the one case a decisive victory, e.g. in a football match; in the other almost the exact opposite: a Pyrrhic victory; or one that cost too much to be profitable.

Lastly, why should 'exterminate', which once meant 'banish', be used to mean 'destroy' or 'uproot', while 'extirpate', which does mean 'uproot', is dying for want of use, or rather eating its head off round the corner?

One more very awkward situation has been created by a random use of the superlative. An affectionate husband the first time he was parted from his wife, wrote to her, as 'Dearest Maria'. The lady, who must have had a grammarian's mind, wrote furiously back charging her liege lord with infidelity, since the word 'dearest' clearly implied there were other Marias nearly as dear as herself. What was he to say?

A still more modern development of speech is the fashionable phrase for expressive thankfulness, irrespective of whether the sensation indicated, is gratitude or the opposite. Why should I say 'Thanks very much' for the tiniest attention from any one? I find myself debarred from any form of words expressing sincere gratitude, for all possible expressions have been ear-marked for the most trivial acknowledgements; as when a sandwich-man tells me he does not know the way to Goodge Street, or when a barber's boy offers me a towel after thinning my hair. Again we notice that slushy talk impoverishes our speech, for the dwindling minority of sensible people.

'The use of language,' said some wag long ago, 'is to conceal our thoughts.' If that were true, it would be our duty to join the large group of those who go about with lies. But all the time we wish to safeguard our speech from the corroding influence of confused thought and unrecognized falsehood. In this connexion I will pass on an anecdote of Disraeli told me by Thorold Rogers fifty-five years ago.

Robert Browning happened to be sitting next Disraeli at an Academy banquet, the walls of the Chamber being hung with the latest efforts of our young artists. During the meal the Prime Minister indulged in very caustic comments on these pictures, but when he came to his formal speech he startled Browning by pronouncing a florid eulogy upon them. Browning was too amazed to attend to the subject that evening; but the next morning met Disraeli on the Embankment and, finding him in a very genial mood, ventured on the inquiry: 'Was there not some slight discrepancy between the

tone of your speech last night and that of your remarks to me previously?' The rejoinder was highly characteristic: 'The fact is, it is only you poets who think there is any connexion between what we say and what we think.' The ironical banter was not so wide of the mark as might be supposed. Poets have often been credited with seeing deeper into life's mysteries than other people. Let us then act on the conviction that if thought initiates speech, speech gives substance to thought; and appeal to our fellow men to see that that substance is gold and not tinsel; truth and not falsehood; and along with truth, beauty.

It would, however, be a waste of time to continue this enumeration, especially in the hearing of people who know the late H. W. and F. G. Fowler's learned and acute treatise. I wish to explain, however, that the principal instances I have chosen are not like his, subtle ambiguities into which skilled and thoughtful writers have fallen, but commonplace instances of palpable wrong treatment of language by the multitude as if we educated folk had no responsibility in the matter, and as if no one who murders the King's English did any particular harm. But common sense ought to tell us that it is little short of idiotic to be blind to the mischief going on around us. Would that the writings of that most gifted scholar and divine, Dean Church, were not sinking into oblivion. Next to Newman he was perhaps our greatest prose writer. His mind was one of superb poise; always drawn to the consideration of the deep centres of great subjects, and always concerned with the peril that threatens us all—especially nowadays—of tampering with our sense of truth by the incessant, unabashed bandying of words in the wrong meaning or with no meaning at all. The gravity of the danger will I think be fairly manifest to those who reflect on the treatment accorded to great solemn words such as we have considered. But is it not patent that there is no question—however minute it may seem to be—as to the right use of words which does not challenge us in respect of what we may call right-mindedness as distinct from the baneful disposition to halt between truth and falsehood in little things; to acquiesce or even to be proud of that sloppiness of thought which impoverishes our language and deprives us of our inherited resources for the precise statement of the truth as we see it. This is no light matter. A vast amount of time, energy, and temper is being squandered every day by the leading men of all nations in wrestling with ambiguous phrases imbedded in resolutions, compacts, and international agreements; just as for centuries there has been uncertainty and most regrettable misunderstanding in theological statements and statutory enactments

of all kinds. The world to-day would not be the scene of the hideous chaos that it is, had it not been for the use of ambiguous phrases by the nations in the fifty-four international conferences which have been held since the War. No one can measure the extent to which this and other more radical mischief has been encouraged by the misuse of words in common talk and ephemeral writing.

Now I maintain that though our Association can only do a little it can do more than it has done. At first it would seem like calling upon a tiny group of thoughtful men and women to correct the influence of a multitude; to play the part of Mrs. Partington with her mop in days when the sea has become an ocean and the domestic utensil no bigger than it was of yore. But the objection, *Quid valeant pauci contra tot milia fortes?* is, as it invariably has been, quite irrelevant. There is always a moment in the growth of a pernicious habit when a judicious warning may check its further development. Could not our Association quietly assume the authority which by right belongs to it and take upon itself to withstand those errors in popular speech which are more than trivial: that is, that betray a dangerous but still curable muddle-headedness?

The method to adopt is a question I leave to others, only suggesting that we must not be afraid of publicity; the mischief we have to attack is public, many-headed, and widely diffused. Our assault upon it must be marked by vigilance, promptitude, and confidence; not by excess of modesty or too great unwillingness to step now and then on many toes.

I have a vision before me of a corner in the front page of *The Times* and other daily journals, where, on fitting occasions, should appear in impressive type a caustic mention of a popular slang use of some fine, dignified word, and along with that, a quotation from some great and half-forgotten author, of the same word in its proper signification. The appeal would be to the huge multitude, not unfairly described by the epithet 'semi-educated': for they are still able when the true and the false are fairly offered for their choice to recognize and cleave to the good and discard the bad. Thereby we should also keep alive the names of great writers who are in danger of oblivion. To bring this about, a little standing Committee should be carefully chosen, to act together, vested not with the authority of individual names but with the growing prestige of the English Association.

It is not for us to forecast success for any endeavour, but it may be emphatically said that if such action effected any result at all it could not be for harm, but might be for lasting benefit to an unknown number of our people.

A COPY OF THIS PAMPHLET is supplied to all full members of the Association. They can obtain further copies (price 1s., postage extra) on application to A. V. HOUGHTON, the Secretary of the Association, 4 Buckingham Gate, S.W. 1.

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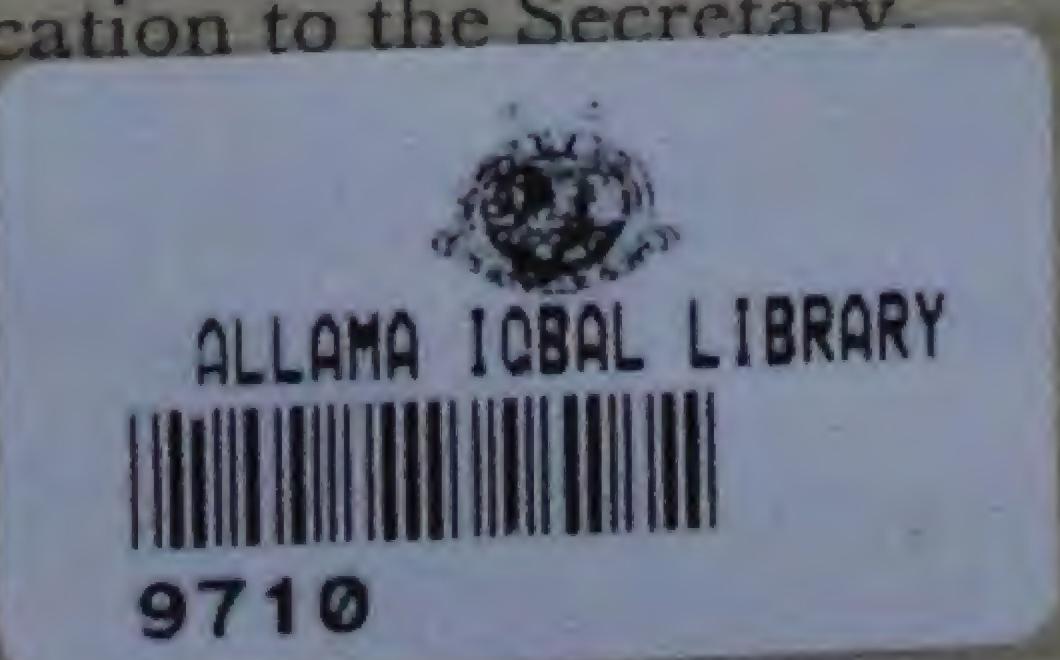
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